DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 336 852 EA 023 332

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TITLE The Meanings of "At-Risk", Whose Meanings Count, and Why: Experts, Reformers, Policymakers and Teachers.
PUB DATE 91
NOTE 55p.; Revision of paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, April 3-7, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC03 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *At Risk Persons; Educational Diagnosis; Elementary Secondary Education; *High Risk Students; *Identification; *Labeling (of Persons); *Semantics; Teacher Attitudes

ABSTRACT

Ways of identifying at-risk students are examined in this paper, which compares the perceptions of four groups--educational researchers, national reform groups, student and local policymakers, and teachers. The comparison is placed within the social and historical contexts of the development of educational policies for at-risk students in the late 1980s. Semantic discourse and critical policy analyses of ERIC documents and interviews were used to examine sources of the "at risk" label, reasons for its rapid diffusion, and how policymakers defined it. A conclusion is that policymakers consulted researchers, who used an epidemiological model, for advice on how to identify students. However, consideration of teachers' views of at-risk students based on a social constructivist model is advocated as a starting point for reform. The recommendation is made to abandon the "at risk" label that predicts and predetermines student failure. (101 references) (LMI)

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The Meanings of At Risk, Whose Meanings Count, and Why: Experts, Reformers, Policymakers and Teachers

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EA 023 332

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, April 3-7, 1991.

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Experts, Reformers, Policymakers and Teachers

ABSTRACT

In the late 1980s, educational policymakers responded to demands of national reform groups and local constituencies by formulating policies for at-risk students. This study considers sources of the student label, at risk, why it diffused so quickly, and how policymakers defined it. Policymakers consulted researchers, rather than teachers, for advice on identifying at-risk students. Researchers' methods, based on an epidemiological model, promised to accurately target limited program funds. Teachers' socially constructed identifications, on the other hand, may be viewed as an impossible basis for policymaking. But they do provide a valuable point of view on at-riskness, that could be the basis for more authentic school reforms.

I. INTRODUCTION

This study compares four groups and their ways of identifying students as at-risk: educational researchers; national education reform groups; state and local policymakers; and classroom teachers. Rather than simply comparing data across groups, I have placed the comparison in the social context of the development of national, state and district policies for at-risk students in the late 1980s. The four groups played different roles in the policy process, related to their different powers and positions in the educational system. They also became involved in the policy process at different times. Therefore, presenting the study as an historical narrative seemed to best represent the findings.

The questions guiding my comparisons were not simply descriptive. They were political and critical: Whose definition of the term <u>at risk</u>, and therefore whose ways of identifying at-risk students, would policymakers choose as a guide to policy formulation? What were the consequences of this choice?[1]

II. BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

A study by Richardson, Casanova, Placier and Guilfoyle (1989) found that for elementary teachers a student's at-risk status was to a great extent context-dependent. Teacher-defined at-risk status seemed to fall along a continuum of context-dependency, from students whose school behaviors were so marked that they would probably be identified by any teacher in the U.S., to students who were considered at-risk by one teacher but

not by another. Teacher identifications of at-risk students were termed fluid or unstable, because they tended to change over a fairly short time (5 months) as students changed, teachers and students made mutual adaptations, or the classroom population shifted. The authors called this the Social Constructivist Model of at-risk status, because a student's at-riskness emerged from the interaction between student characteristics and teacher expectations, in the cultural context of a particular classroom and school.

In a review of the literature on at-risk students, Richardson et al. also found that most educational researchers identified at-risk students statistically, by correlating student characteristics with school failure or dropping out. They termed this the Epidemiological Model for identifying at-risk students, because of its commonalities with methods used by public health professionals to identify at-risk populations. At the time of the Richardson et al. study (1986-87), the policy implications of this contrast between teachers and researchers were not clear. Subsequently, numerous states and districts have developed policies defining and creating special programs for the at-risk student population. My subsequent studies of the construction of at-risk student policies suggested that the demands of the policy process work in favor of the Epidemiological Model. This study was designed to develop explanations for this advantage of one model over the other in policy decisions.

Previous sociolinguistic studies have developed distinctions between the semantic and discourse processes of experts and nonexperts (Lehrer, 1983) or professionals and lay persons (Mehan, 1983) that provided direction for this study. Lehrer (1983) has found that experts strive for precise classifications, often based on what they consider to be objective criteria; while nonexperts make very loose classifications based on evaluative or subjective criteria. My extension of Lehrer's reasoning is that these semantic processes are stratified in American society, and that expert classifications are favored by policymakers. Mehan (1983) has shown that discourse processes are stratified in the institution of education. Teachers have less influence than specialists over educational decisions in schools by virtue of their "nonprofessional" ways of speaking, despite their more direct relationships with children. This study places Mehan's distinctions in an even broader social context.

III. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

Texts collected for the study included articles and reports identified through a search of the ERIC database from 1/66 through 12/90. The original sample, of all texts with the term <u>at risk</u> in their titles, was selected for a sociolinguistic study of the term <u>at risk</u>. The subsample for this study was made up of texts including the term <u>identification</u> or a similar term in the title, descriptors or abstract. These texts were sorted into categories by author type and ordered chronologically. Not surprisingly, there were no texts produced by teachers identified

by the search. Therefore, teacher data were derived from teacher interviews for two studies (Richardson et al., 1989; Placier, 1989) and from mentions of teachers in the ERIC texts. Sources of data for each of the four groups (researchers or experts, policy groups, policymakers, and teachers) will be more specifically identified in the Findings sections. Further data on identification of at-risk students came from interviews and documents collected during fieldwork at the state and district levels in Arizona in 1986-87 and 1988-89.

The methodology for text analysis combined semantic discourse analysis (Lehrer, 1983; Van Dijk, 1985) and critical policy analysis (Schon, 1979; Edelman, 1977, 1984; McHoul, 1986). The texts varied greatly in form, length and style; therefore, a system was developed for deriving comparable information from them. For texts not on computer disk, such as reform reports and policy documents, I developed an open-ended form with key questions related to meanings of the term <u>at risk</u>, framing of the problem of at-risk students and proposed solutions. As documents were read and reread, segments responding to each question were coded. Then a document summary was created on disk by filling in the answers to the questions (key quotations, with page numbers). This process facilitated further comparison across documents.

For interviews transcribed on computer disk, a coding system corresponding to the same questions was used, and coded segments were sorted into new files. In some cases the data were further reduced. For example, teacher discussions of at-risk students

were so complex that charts of characteristics of at-risk students (semantic domains) were developed. However, based on the recommendations of Mishler (1986) on the conduct and analysis of interviews, teacher stories of at-risk students were also compiled intact, in order to identify common patterns or themes across these narratives.

IV. FINDINGS

A. How At-Risk Experts Used the Term 'At Risk' before 1985

The sample for this analysis included all pre-1985 articles with the term at risk in the title, and the concept of "identification" either in the title or the abstract (n=18). Before 1985, most of the writers whose work appeared in the ERIC database under titles including the term at risk worked in certain specialized fields. Some worked in what ERIC calls the "education-related" fields of social work, mental health, clinical psychology, and child/adolescent development. Other authors worked within education: in special education, compensatory education, and educational psychology. What all of these writers had in common was their grounding in a medical or quasi-medical approach to children.

At risk is a term most widely used in the medical subfield of epidemiology, where it is associated with the process of identifying populations most likely to fall victim to a condition in the future. These identifications then serve to more efficiently target health education, prevention and early treatment efforts.[2] The problem the educational at-risk experts

presented was the same: how to identify children who have not yet fallen victim to a condition, such as mental illness or handicap, but are more likely to fall victim in the future. Most (14) of the articles were reports of research on early identification instruments.[3] The researchers' expressed motivation for conducting such investigations was the need for more accurate prediction, in order to prevent or minimize the harm to children. However, children were not their sole concern. In several (n=6) cases, the authors said that more efficient or less costly methods of early identification were in demand because of changes in public policy. Eight authors also discussed the serious implications of misidentification of children, in the context of more legal scrutiny of special programs. Therefore, the identification of at-risk children was not simply a matter of intellectual challenge or altruism; it had political meanings.

In seven cases, the researchers employed the sorts of longitudinal or retrospective designs common in epidemiology. Such designs involve correlating measures of certain variables hypothesized to be predictors with the later appearance of a condition. The highest correlations indicated the best predictors of the condition, and were identified as "risk factors." Other studies (n=2) correlated student scores on measures with teacher ratings of the students' "at-riskness," or (n=3) chose a score on a measure or teacher rating as a cut-off for classifying a student as at-risk or not at-risk. In these studies researchers assumed that the at-risk child was already

exhibiting signs of trouble. The risk, presumably, was that the child's condition would become worse over time, without intervention. Intervention, the delivery of special treatments designed to prevent or ameliorate a condition, was the next step in all of these identification schemes.

The concept of prevention is very seductive in public policy. The argument runs that we could avert untold suffering (not to mention expense) by preventing problems before they occur. As one set of researchers put it,

> Generally, the rationale (and sanction) for early identification procedures is based on the concept of intervention and amelioration of disabling conditions in the formative stages of children's development. This reasoning clearly reflects a humanitarian, developmentally-oriented desire to lessen the impact of disabling conditions on children and prevent more difficult remediation in later grades. Wide support for this concept is apparent in the educational, medical, and psychological communities, as well as parental support for such an effort (Maggliocca, Rinaldi & Stephens, 1979, p. 214).

The promise is prediction and control of a serious and expensive social problem. This promise motivated the research funding that helped many of the researchers in this earlier period to develop improved prediction instruments. In addition, more accurate identifications would minimize the danger of mislabelling, which in the special education field of the 1970s was becoming a political issue.

This question of accuracy would become extremely problematic when measures were to be used for early identification of <u>individuals</u> (rather than populations) for placement in prevention programs.[4] By the end of this period, the at-risk experts'

enthusiasm for early identification and prevention through the epidemiological model was beginning to wane:

> there is the problem of evidence about individuals as opposed to populations. Epidemiological studies provide information on the overall incidence of various types of difficulties. Here, errors of misclassification about individuals are not important provided that the overall estimate is correct. However, this is not sufficient in the early identification field, as the correct classification of individuals is of paramount importance (Lindsay & Wedell, 1982, p. 212).

Some writers were becoming critical of the predictive validity and reliability of expert-designed instruments (Asher, Markel & Hymel, 1981; Lindsay & Wedell, 1982; Abramson, 1983). The latter two articles recommended that educators should give up on the idea of prediction altogether and adopt the practice of immediately responding to learning problems identified by parents and classroom teachers -- a continuous and ecologically valid process of assessment and intervention. This was an interesting development, given that the prediction studies had often relied heavily on teacher judgments. In two studies, teachers administered expert-designed screening instruments (Evans, 1973; Ramey & Gowen, 1980). More interestingly, correlations with teacher identifications of at-risk students were used to <u>validate</u> predictive instruments in four studies (Hartman & Poser, 1975; Magliocca, Rinaldi & Stephens, 1979; Ireton, Shing-Lun & Kampen, 1981; Badian, 1984).[5]

Stevens & Pihl (1982b) argued that the causes of school failure are so difficult to trace into the past that teacher observations of school performance are equally accurate and more

efficient than predictive tests. They had found it "impressive that teachers would be able to predict which students would earn the lowest and highest grades in a new school at seven months and one year later" (1982b, p. 544). Teachers seemed to be skilled at identifying "polar groups," those least and most at-risk. Therefore, these researchers had begun to rely on teachers to identify at-risk students for their intervention studies.

Two articles critical of early identification schemes pointed out that since young children are rapidly changing, their scores on predictive instruments are naturally unstable (Lindsay & Wedell, 1982; Abramson, 1983).[6] Lindsay and Wedell (1982) argued that because few of the early identification instruments in use were research-based or valid enough to prevent misclassification, and teacher identifications had predictive validities as good as the best instruments, reliance on teacher identifications would reduce time and cost. Abramson (1983), also critical of predictive instruments, contended that risk is situational, dependent on the "environment in which children are expected to function" (p. 16). In short, these experts were beginning to espouse the Social Constructivist Model of at-risk classification.

From around 1985 and after, there was a definite shift in the literature on identification of students labelled <u>at risk</u>. This shift seems best explained by the fact that after <u>A Nation at Risk</u> in 1983, the term <u>at risk</u> was no longer exclusive to the specialized jargon of the experts. Anything and anyone were

labelled at-risk for communicative effect; and at risk as a descriptor of students shifted in meaning. At this point in the study, I leave the experts for a time, since they were not the group responsible for this linguistic change.

B. How "At Risk" Shifted from Expert Jargon to Reform Rhetoric

A Nation at Risk was the first major reform report to present a new way of using the term at risk to describe students:

> The Federal Government, in cooperation with States and localities, should help meet the needs of key groups of students such as the gifted and talented, the socioeconomically disadvantaged, minority and language minority students, and the handicapped. In combination these groups include both national resources and the Nation's youth who are most at risk (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 32).

If one assumes, given the general themes of this report, that by "national resources" the authors meant the "gifted and talented," that leaves the remaining groups identified as the "most at risk." If by at risk they referred to socioeconomically disadvantaged, minority and language minority students, at risk appeared to be a likely prospect for a 1980s replacement for the discarded 1960-70s policy term, culturally disadvantaged.

The process of replacing labels for stigmatized categories of students has a long history in education. For example, in the not-too-distant past, psychologists considered such terms as "imbecile" and "idiot" to be acceptable, objective ways of describing persons whose IQ scores fell within certain ranges. In common usage these terms came to constitute the gravest of insults. Subsequently, the terms were replaced by other, more neutral terms (Bolinger, 1980). Bolinger and Sears (1981) argue

that in a competitive, highly politicized society policymakers often strive to strip their language of negative connotations. The objective is to create a "denatured" language devoid of reference to politics, emotion or prejudice. If a term's connotations become too negative, it is replaced by another euphemism. However, replacement of terms for stigmatized groups is neither a complete not a permanent solution to the root problem of stigmatization. Euphemism replacement tends to be a cyclical process (e.g., "mentally retarded" is now "out" as well) (Schulz, 1975; Bolinger, 1980).

The last great outpouring of public concern for poor and/or minority students was the War on Poverty era of the 1960s. At that time, such students were labelled with the euphemism culturally disadvantaged. This term was gradually discarded after considerable political criticism. As a sign of its political disgrace, ERIC purged culturally disadvantaged from its list of descriptors in 1980 (Thesaurus of ERIC Descriptors, 1987). If a revival of interest in poor and/or minority students was to occur in the 1980s, it could not bring about a revival of this dead buzzword. A new, politically neutral label would have to be found. At risk seemed to fit this description.[7]

In 1985, another report reinforced the use of at risk to describe children who once were labelled culturally disadvantaged -- Barriers to Excellence: Our Children at Risk, published by the National Coalition of Advocates for Students (NCAS). This report described certain groups of children (poor, minority, immigrant,

female, "special needs") as at risk of discrimination and unfair treatment in schools. As a liberal counterpoint to A Nation at Risk, the authors revived the concerns of the War on Poverty and civil rights eras, arguing that the educational problems identified then had not been solved. In fact, the authors warned that in the wake of A Nation at Risk the function of schooling was in danger of shifting even further from promotion of equal opportunity toward perpetuation of inequality (p. vi). The report's recommendations were that educators should not create more categorical programs (the strategy of the 1960s) that would label and segregate "children at risk." Rather, they should change their practices toward such students. Despite these intentions, the report was later credited with contributing to a new wave of student labelling, by "making the term 'at risk students' part of the reform lexicon" (Hill, 1989, p. 53).

Therefore, with both conservative and liberal endorsement, at risk became the new buzzword for describing unsuccessful, predominantly poor and minority students.[8] The term was politically useful because it was putatively neutral with regard to race and class, a perfect example of a "denatured" label (Bolinger and Sears, 1981). As Jonathan Kozol pointed out at a National Forum on Youth at Risk in 1987:

> The title of this conference, though apt, is a trifle antiseptic. Youth at risk is a sanitized term. It doesn't carry much effect, much emotion. Devastated children would be closer to the truth in many cases. (Kozol in ECS, 1988, p. 22-3).

What Kozol considered the limitations of the term at risk were

precisely its linguistic strengths as reform rhetoric. For conservatives, at risk was associated with A Nation at Risk and the argument that a recommitment to academic excellence would improve the nation's economic competitiveness. For liberals, it was associated with a revival of interest in educational equity. Who could ask for more in a buzzword?

Another aspect of at risk, related to its meanings in the public health and insurance fields, was its reference to the future. Rexford Brown of the Education Commission of the States (ECS) observed that

> Since the publication of A Nation at Risk, the term "at risk" has been applied so widely that it is losing its force. But it seems to have found a lasting adjectival place with respect to "at risk" youth, and it invited continued use, despite its awkwardness, because it conveys something important. In general, any young people so described are thought to be headed for relatively short, unhappy, unhealthy, unproductive, circumscribed, unprosperous or marginal lives in adulthood (Brown, 1986, p. 5).

Kozol found fault with at risk on this basis:

> Youth at risk implies a possible danger in the future. But we don't live in the future. And it is the present sorrows we need to face (Kozol in ECS, 1988, p. 22-3).

However, it is this association of at risk with the promise of control of the future that has also contributed to its appeal as a buzzword. The argument in the literature on at-risk students is that if young people are allowed to follow the trajectory described by Brown, they will become a drain on the economy and a strain on government that will eventually bring about the nation's decline. The future of both unsuccessful students and American society (i.e., the dominant majority) are at risk

(McCann and Austin, 1988). If these students can be identified early and "inoculated" against such outcomes, a doomsday scenario could be averted.

Therefore, the denotations of at risk (poor, often minority students) may not have been different from culturally disadvantaged, but the connotations were. Responsibility for the problems of poor, minority students would also be distributed differently this time around. Given cutbacks in federal expenditures for education and other social services in the 1980s, the responsibility for averting this national crisis fell to the states (Clark & Astuto, 1986). Brown of ECS (1986) urged state education policy-makers to face their responsibility for the consequences of reforms they had adopted in the wake of A Nation at Risk. They had tightened standards without addressing "remediation for students who do not meet those standards", the "disadvantaged" or "at-risk" youth, three-quarters of whom are minorities (p. 7). DeLone (1987) contended that only state governments were in a position to tackle this crisis, since they control and therefore can coordinate the systems (education, welfare, juvenile justice, health) with which at-risk youth tend to become involved. In response to such pressures, at-risk student reforms were proposed in many states as part of a second wave of education reform in the late 1980s (Murphy, 1989).

For all of these reasons, at risk dramatically increased in use as a student descriptor in the ERIC database after 1985. The earlier at-risk experts continued their efforts at early

identification of mentally ill or handicapped children. But several new groups adopted the term: national education policy groups, state and local policymakers, a new flock of at-risk experts, and critics.

C. What National Groups Recommended: Identifying the At-Risk Population

Most national education policy groups published reports on at-risk students in the years 1986-89, further diffusing at risk as a student descriptor. Few of these documents offered explicit advice on identification of at-risk students; their purposes were largely to motivate policymakers to act, by convincing them that a serious problem existed. How would policymakers come to a consensus on defining the at-risk population? In one attempt, CCSSO's Elements of a model state statute to provide educational entitlements for at-risk students (1987b) recommended that income, ethnicity, and academic failure should be the primary identifiers of at-risk students. The identification criteria written into the model statute were:

> 1) Preschoolers: Family income at or below the federally-determined poverty level; or inability to speak and comprehend English.

At the early intervention stage, children would be broadly targeted by income using a standard cut-off point or English language proficiency. Programs implemented at this level would be extensions of the Head Start concept of compensatory, early childhood education.

> 2) Kindergarten through grade three: Family income at or below poverty level; not making substantial progress in "basic skills;" or deemed at-risk by the principal

in consultation with parents and school staff.

Once children are in school, academic measures and the opinions of school administrators, parents and teachers are added as criteria. But for the most part, children in this category are the children already targeted by compensatory programs such as Chapter I.

> Grades four through twelve: Low scores on statewide achievement tests; retained in grade one or more years; extended absences or temporarily dropped out; or deemed at-risk by the principal in consultation with parents and school staff. Indicators could include drug or alcohol use, pregnancy, delinquency, or attempted suicide (CCSSO, 1987b, pp. 8-9).

In the upper grades, the criteria become more quantifiable, based on data collected or observed at school rather than background characteristics such as income and ethnicity, and also more behavioral. These are students who are not merely at-risk; they are already in trouble.

CCSSO's identification of the at-risk population was still a very broad entitlement for poor children, which would call for a massive state response. However, in the policy culture of the 1980s, it was not politic to use broad demographic categories such as income and race to entitle huge numbers of students to new categorical services (Clark and Astuto, 1986). Policymakers would try to delimit the at-risk population, to "target" scarce funds accurately and efficiently.

ECS issued a report advising policymakers on how to use data on students and schools to better target at-risk funds. As the author (Van Dougherty) explained, once convinced that attention

to at-risk students was warranted, state and local policymakers were searching for feasible approaches:

> They want to know where to put the effort, where to put the money, how much it will cost and what kinds of policies and programs will help solve the problem. But they are getting different messages about who is at risk, what kinds of information they should collect, and what are the best ways to use that information (ECS, 1987a, p. 3).

Dougherty described and critiqued the two predominant ways of identifying at-risk students:

1) Student indicators. The epidemiological model prevailed: identifying characteristics of students that correlate with dropping out and developing checklists or profiles of these characteristics. Often these characteristics are those on which data are routinely collected by schools in such forms as attendance records, achievement test scores, grades and retention decisions. Therefore, this is a relatively quick and inexpensive identification method. Dougherty questioned whether at-risk profiles based on school records might not ignore "qualitative" indicators noticed by teachers. She noted that some districts had decided to include teacher viewpoints or "observed data" in their identification processes. She also pointed out that research on profiles was beginning to question their accuracy and reliability as predictors. Some studies had found that "the most accurate identification methods frequently use data not readily available in student records, such as teacher observations and interviews" (p. 8).

Moreover, Dougherty continued, socioeconomic status, gender,

and race/ethnicity would be "fairly useless predictors" when most students in a school or district share these characteristics. In addition, echoing previous concerns about early identification schemes, Dougherty warned that

> a key concern for state and local policymakers is how to use profiles or indicators, and at the same time avoid negative labels, stigmas and self-fulfilling prophecies. Identifying students as being at risk could potentially do more harm than good if efforts are not made to ensure that such students are not subjected to situations that increase their disconnection to school and their education (p. 10).

2) School Indicators. Dougherty continued that socioeconomic status, gender and race/ethnicity, along with family background, are not characteristics of students that educators have the power to change. Educators do have the power to change their responses to such students. Most student checklists or profiles ignored school characteristics that might contribute to dropping out. Other research was attempting to identify school characteristics that seemed to be associated with higher rates of failure and dropping out. Dougherty suggested that asking students about their schools and school experiences would identify trouble spots that may cause student alienation from school. This way of framing the problem would direct policymakers toward collecting data on schools or programs, not students (e.g., Wehlage and Rutter, 1986).

Despite ECS's advice, few states or districts seem to have taken the latter direction. Most moved toward the "student indicators" approach, to identify individual students as at-risk in order to narrowly target their effort and expenditures.

Reflecting the demand for at-risk identification procedures, the number of articles and documents on identification of at-risk students in the ERIC database increased after 1985. State departments of education, school districts, regional laboratories, private research groups and individual researchers were all working on this problem. The following section takes a closer look at how state and district policymakers identified at-risk students, with data derived both from fieldwork in Arizona and ERIC documents.

D. How State and Local Policymakers, with the Help of the Experts, Have Identified At-Risk Students

The sample of ERIC documents for this section of the study included those with at risk in the title and the concept of "identification" in the title, descriptors or abstract, for the years 1985-1990. Of 33 texts, 19 based on the new conception of at-risk students were selected for analysis; the remainder continued the pre-1985 pattern (n=14) or were unavailable (n=2). An additional 9 documents, descriptions of state or district at-risk policies, were located in the larger sample of all at risk titles. Categories of texts in the total sample were: state at-risk reports (n=8), district reports (n=5, university-based research (n=9), regional lab reports (n=3) and private research group reports (n=3).

From analysis of state documents on at-risk policies, it appears that state policymakers took the position that before they could implement policies to respond to at-risk students, they would have to cautiously define the at-risk population. The

definition in CCSSO's model statute was so broad that it would entail (as CCSSO acknowledged) a very broad and expensive response. Few states appeared to be prepared to take such dramatic action. Education Week reported in 1988 that state efforts for at-risk students were uncoordinated and scattershot in their approach (Mirga, 1988). In an interview with an Education Week editor who had conducted a survey of state at-risk programs, he said that every state was "thrashing about" for a definition of at risk, and as a result there were "wild" differences in meanings across states (Ed. Week editor B, 11/88).

A CCSSO follow-up survey found that thirty-nine state education agencies had "working definitions" of at-risk students. In only two states were definitions of at risk left to the local level. Therefore, the identification of at-risk students in most states was being decided at the state level. There were four predominant meanings: 1) low achievement, 2) behavior problems, 3) high likelihood of dropping out, and/or 4) evidence of one or more risk indicators, conditions known to be predictors of poor achievement or dropping out. The first two definitions do not rely on prediction or early identification, since they refer to conditions that are already present. The second two definitions refer to the student's future, and therefore do rely on prediction (CCSSO, 1987c).

Efforts driven by definition 3) may be perceived as less effective and efficient than those driven by definition 4). As the earlier at-risk experts had pointed out, there are both

humanitarian and economic reasons for preferring an early identification model. If some accurate way could be devised for identifying potential dropouts early, the argument goes, it would save students from suffering the effects of undereducation and save much of the money now going to social programs. For example, a "Background Paper" from the California Department of Education explains how attractive early identification is to state policymakers:

> [After citing the high costs of acute interventions] The tragedy in this is that all available evidence indicates that prevention and early intervention ar more successful educationally, socially, and financially than remediation efforts (California Department of Education, 1990, p. 63).

The paper cited the Committee for Economic Development and the California Business Roundtable as recommending preschool programs because of the cost savings they could realize. From other reports, it is abundantly clear that many business groups have lobbied for the earlier identification approach for this reason.

Once convinced that the early identification or prevention model is the preferable alternative, some policymakers were off in search of identification criteria or predictors. This created a demand for new research-based knowledge at the state level. State agencies conducted their own studies or commissioned studies on how to determine these criteria. In no case did I find evidence that state governments consulted with local educators before conducting this research.

In general, the advent of the at-risk student issue marked an increase in centralized collection of data on students by

state government and in decisionmaking based on the analysis of this data. One can also see in almost every case that research or researchers were consulted to help policymakers devise new data collection methods and/or to analyze the data at their disposal. In the Northeast and Northwest, regional research labs took on the role of data collection and analysis for several states. In other states, in-house researchers, private research groups or university-based researchers were consulted.

Although states are very different in their policy climates, a brief case study of one state in which I conducted an in-depth study of the construction of at-risk policies may illustrate some of the dynamics behind these trends. In Arizona, state policymakers in 1986-87, when talk first began about the need for at-risk policies, were facing a worse-than-usual budget crisis. Nevertheless, there was broad-based community support, and bipartisan political support, for policies for at-risk students. The statewide dropout rate was 30%, higher among Mexican American and Native American populations. Arizona business groups were calculating the future costs of a demographically different and undereducated workforce. The crime rate was up and mandatory sentencing laws were swelling prison populations and prison budgets. When I interviewed state policymakers on their analyses of the at-risk student problem, they clearly connected at-risk policies with these labor and crime trends. They argued that if students likely to drop out of school could be identified early and somehow prevented from doing so, the economy would improve

and millions of dollars going into the welfare and criminal justice systems would be saved. The Chair of the Senate Education Committee explained that the term "dropout" meant that educators "do not start early enough, so we have moved to a preventive mentality, and an early intervention mentality" (Steiner, 7/89, p. 7). The linguistic properties of the term at risk also contributed to Arizona politicians' bipartisan consensus on this issue. The same committee chair, sponsor of Arizona's at-risk legislation, said that a neutral term such as at risk avoids association with race and poverty, and thereby short-circuits conservative resistance to "favoring" certain groups.

In 1988, the year that Arizona passed its at-risk legislation, the state was still mired in a fiscal crisis. Though its seemed pathetically inadequate in relation to the size of the dropout problem, $4.5 million was squeezed out for at-risk pilot projects. The bill creating these projects did not specify a definition of at risk. That was left to the Department of Education, which was also charged with deciding how to distribute the funds. The recently elected Superintendent of Public Instruction used the definition of at risk as an opportunity to demonstrate the research capabilities of the Department. According to her public statements the new Superintendent believed that the handling of the at-risk issue would mark a new era in educational policy in Arizona. In the past, there was little monitoring of the distribution and use of state funds for special programs at the local level. For the first time, she

said, the legislature and the people of Arizona could have confidence in how their money was being spent, because the funds would be accurately targeted on the basis of "hard data" gathered and analyzed by the department.

The department's Research Unit conducted its own study to identify the indicators of at-riskness, using data already available to them, with the district as the unit of analysis. The dependent variable was achievement test scores, while the independent variables considered were student absenteeism, socioeconomic status (SES), limited English proficiency (LEP), mobility, and district dropout rate. The study determined that low SES and high numbers of LEP students were the best predictors of low district achievement test scores. These findings were hardly surprising, but they did provide the Department and the legislature with an objective, apolitical basis for distributing at-risk funds to the students (or districts, actually) who most needed them. Ironically, the best predictors identified were income and ethnicity, the two issues that the sponsor of the bill had said were too controversial to mention explicitly. Also ironically, there were so many districts that qualified as "high risk" by this definition, that the Department had to develop a objective rating system for screening at-risk program proposals. This system eliminated all but a few for the running to receive the state's limited allocations.

In Arizona, as in other states, the at-risk student issue marked an increased interest in state-level collection of data on

students. From their vantage point in the state capitol, their only contact with students coming through quantitative information submitted by districts, most state policymakers defined at risk statistically. In the same manner, a state public health office might have tracked the incidence of a disease, identifying the risk factors for that disease and locating the populations most at risk.

A 1988 critique of state at-risk policies issued by MDC (a private, foundation-funded policy analysis group) concluded that from examining state initiatives for at-risk youth, one would infer that the at-risk population was very small. Legislation was piecemeal and allocations represented only a minor proportion of the total state education budget. This was despite the fact that at-risk students (as MDC defined them, primarily poor, minority and handicapped students) represent one fourth or more of the student population. What MDC failed to understand is that just as the national policy groups had identified the problem and passed responsibility on to the states, so many state governments would limit themselves primarily to conducting research to identify and map the at-risk population, passing responsibility for solutions to school districts.

The state reports illustrate that as at-risk policies proliferated, so did at-risk research.[9] In some cases, as in Arizona, states conducted their own, in-house research. So did large school districts with research capacities. For example, Gastright (1987) reports on research conducted by the Cincinnati

Public Schools to pinpoint factors that distinguish dropouts from stay-ins, and Hoover (1989) illustrates how one school principal developed a Risk Potential scale based on his own research in a Maryland district. In Providence, Rhode Island, the school district joined a Dropout Prevention Collaborative including several other community agencies and organizations. This group conducted a local analysis of data from student records, interviews with dropouts and potential dropouts, and indicators cited by agency representatives and experts at a conference sponsored by the Collaborative. The study resulted in a list of characteristics of Providence's at-risk students (Feld et al., 1987).

In some instances researchers from outside of state agencies and districts collaborated with policymakers to develop identification schemes. In two regions at least, regional labs adopted research on at-risk students as one of their top priorities. The Northwest Regional Education Laboratory in Portland set about developing a regional database of information on students to "aid state level decision-makers in identifying the prevalence and distribution of students at risk" (Gabriel and Anderson, 1987, p. 1). Using criteria cited in previous research as the best predictors of dropping out, they mapped the prevalence of these characteristics in each state. In some cases data was not available, e.g., on school behaviors of students or drug/alcohol use, prompting the lab to recommend that states begin centralized collection of such data. A report from the

Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement of the Northeast and Islands (RLEINI) advised that research would provide the policy solutions to the at-risk problem:

> The seeds of policy solutions for these complex and overlapping problems lie in the cumulative and convergent learning from educational research and successful practice over the last twenty years. Combined, they provide a firm foundation on which to build new school processes. However, to have impact, this knowledge must be used to shape new policy interventions (RLEINI, 1987, p. 3).

Some districts called upon university-based researchers. For example, Webster and Larson (1989) from San Jose State University's School of Education worked with six school districts in California to develop a "comprehensive longitudinal monitoring system" that would allow early identification and tracking of at-risk students through the system. Via a rating form completed by teachers or support personnel, districts would collect and analyze data on 23 variables for each student. The system would pinpoint the students at risk, according to the researchers, making it an ideal way for districts to collect the information necessary to respond to the state's demands for district accountability for at-risk students. States and districts also consulted private, nonprofit groups such as Research for Better Schools (RBS) in Philadelphia for expert advice on identification. McCann and Austin (1988) report on a collaboration between RBS and the state staffs of Pennsylvania and Maryland. In fact, they reveal that RBS helped to compose Pennsylvania's state report on at-risk policies.

Still more research on identification of at-risk students

was conducted independent of state or district auspices. For example, after members identified at-risk students as a priority for action at an annual meeting, Phi Delta Kappa sponsored a large-scale study on identification of at-risk students (Frymier and Gansneder, 1989; Frymier, 1989). PDK chapter members around the country agreed to participate. Chapters selected three schools in their districts, and in each school selected 100 "typical" students, to make a total of 22,018 students nationwide. Then teachers and counselors filled out questionnaires for each student based on 45 factors identified in more than 100 research studies as valid risk indicators. The number of students labelled at-risk through this process was startling: 25-35% of the students were "seriously at risk" according to this measure, and another 25-30% scored high on six risk indicators (Frymier and Gansneder, 1989).

University-based researcher Goll (1989) has conducted studies based on further analysis of the PDK database. One of her findings is that the more days of school a student misses (through absences or suspension), the more likely s/he is to be retained in grade. Since retention is a good predictor of dropping out, Goll argues, use of absence/suspension data alone could greatly simplify the at-risk identification process. This study seems to confirm the findings of a study of high school freshmen conducted by DeJung (1988), who found that two-thirds of high school dropouts could be identified simply through high absenteeism and low grades.

In summary, the at-risk student movement, conceived in the national reform climate of the 1980s and nurtured by state and district policymakers, brought about a sudden demand for expertise in identification of at-risk students. Researchers, primarily researchers familiar with the epidemiological model, stepped forward in response to this demand.[10] Identification of at-risk students at the state level especially was a product of data analysis in settings far from students. At the district level, probably because of the obvious proximity of students, there seemed to be a tendency to move identification research closer to the individual student, through examination of records or even student interviews. At both levels, the availability of computers made centralized data collection and analysis (long a goal of educational bureaucrats, according to Tyack and Hansot, 1982), and therefore centralized decisionmaking about students, more feasible than ever.

A great deal of this work seems redundant or obvious. Other work labelled "dropout prevention" (e.g., Ekstrom et al., 1986) has identified similar lists of predictors, and similar "risk indicators" were identified over and over in different local studies. Considering this, it would be interesting to know the total cost of these research efforts, i.e., the amount of scarce education funding that was absorbed by at-risk student research.

F. How Teachers Identify At-Risk Students

Of 120 ERIC documents on identification of high risk students (the term ERIC uses as a descriptor) for 1983-1990, the

term teachers appeared in the abstracts of only 27. Of the 28 documents examined for the post-1985 portions of this study, 25 focused primarily on expert or research-based models for identification of at-risk students; only 3 examined teacher identifications in any depth. If teachers appeared at all in the these accounts, their role in most cases was to fill out checklists of risk indicators developed through correlational research. That is, teachers were used as identification "tools," their firsthand knowledge of students restructured through categories developed by the experts. For example, in one Arizona district teachers identified at-risk students in their classrooms via a checklist developed by the district's At-Risk Coordinator, based on criteria identified in the "literature." Many teachers told me that they were unfamiliar with the concept of at risk before the At-Risk Coordinator introduced it and taught them how to fill out the identification form at an inservice meeting.

The at-risk student movement would generally descend upon teachers from above, as is the pattern with recent educational reforms (Frymier, 1987). Teachers were not part of the circle of policymakers and experts who constructed the definition of at risk and determined the identification of at-risk students in state departments and district offices. From a teacher's point of view, the at-risk student concept may have seemed like one more imposition by administrators or researchers. For example, this was the response of one teacher asked to participate in the Richardson et al. (1989) study of at-risk students:

> The point is, I don't see all of a sudden how that's the buzzword. All these kids are at-risk and I don't see it's making any difference whether we're labelling them at-risk or not. For me, someone who hates paperwork, it means me actually sitting down and labelling some kid...First of all, it's a label, second of all, it means more paperwork for me.

This teacher's critique illustrates the skepticism with which some teachers greeted the latest student label. This teacher knew which children in her classroom were in trouble, and wondered why it would take a new label and additional paperwork to "identify" them. And what difference would it make?

Why did policymakers consult researchers rather than teachers as they were formulating their plans to identify at-risk students? There is little indication in the policy reports that the possibility of consulting teachers was even considered. Given the low status of teachers and their structural distance from policymaking settings, this perhaps should not be surprising. For a variety of reasons, despite the earlier findings of researchers such as Stevens and Pihl (1982b), teacher identifications would have been considered a less trustworthy basis for decisionmaking than objective, quantifiable criteria.

First, the term <u>at risk</u> itself may not have been part of teachers' vocabularies. Only one of the teachers we interviewed for the Richardson et al. (1989) study in 1986 was familiar with this term (though this has undoubtedly changed). Their definitions of the term were very tentative. Teachers knew which students in their classrooms were having problems, and could describe them very well, but did not present themselves as

experts in identification of "at risk" students. This term was part of the researchers' expert jargon, not teachers' everyday talk about students.

Previous studies of teachers' discourse are relevant here. In a major study of teacher descriptions of students in the early 1970s, Brophy and others asked 27 elementary teachers to describe each of their students with three adjectives. A total of 362 children were described twice, by two different teachers in successive years. In the appendix of a progress report from this study is a list of 544 descriptors used by the teachers (Brophy et al., 1976). It is evident from the Brophy studies (Anderson et al., 1975; Brophy et al., 1976; Brophy and Evertson, 1981) that teachers are continually creating new descriptors for students, few of which will ever enter the ERIC Thesaurus or become labels for variables in educational research. Teachers had 25 different ways of describing what the researchers simply called "self-motivated" students. Only the experts' psychological labels were featured in the published report of the study (Brophy and Evertson, 1981).

Studies of linguistic practices among persons in different roles in education provide some explanations for the devaluation of teachers' discourse by experts and policymakers. Teachers do not use the kind of technical terminology employed by educational psychologists or other experts. Lortie's interviews with teachers showed a "very low proportion of words which were not commonly used" (1973, p. 73). Teachers, Lortie concluded, do not

have a special, technical vocabulary associated with their work; hence, they have difficulty presenting themselves as experts or professionals possessing "arcane knowledge" because they speak like nonexperts. According to Feiman-Nemser and Floden (1986):

> Teachers often use the same language that social and behavioral scientists do [in describing their work]. However, these abstract descriptions may be remembered from college courses, or picked up as part of the vocabulary of educated people, but they do not express teachers' own perspectives (p. 506).

Mehan (1983) found that teacher descriptions of students in child study meetings are more similar to those of nonexpert laypersons than to educational psychologists or special educators. Specific, contextualized descriptions may be more adaptive to the kind of personalized work teachers do with students (Lampert, 1985). At risk, on the other hand, exemplifies decontextualized, depersonalized description.

Second, even if the technical meanings of at risk had been explained to teachers, they might not have been considered experts in the procedures used to place students in this category. The accuracy of their identifications in comparison with the experts might be questioned. Ironically, the Richardson et al. (1989) study may have contributed to this perception, by emphasizing the unstable and fluid qualities of teacher identification. For example, a study by Fuchs (1987) concludes that inconsistencies and biases in teacher referrals have serious consequences if the outcome is placement of students in special programs. Because of such findings, teachers have difficulty presenting themselves as experts in the identification of at-risk

students.

One study which specifically examined teacher identifications of at-risk students raised similar concerns. As part of the Omaha school district's development of an at-risk student plan, Kagan (1988) compared elementary teachers' identifications of at-risk students with characteristics of students who actually did drop out of high school. Teachers seemed to be somewhat unreliable predictors over this long time span. They over-identified students as at-risk, i.e., over-predicted the numbers who would fail in later years. This would be a serious concern if students labelled at-risk by teachers were to be pulled out for special treatment. Kagan explains her findings with reference to the Social Constructivist Model, speculating that teachers relied on their interpretations of the student's social behavior in the context of a classroom, in which certain students stand out even though their deviance may not be all that serious. Her conclusions:

> Despite teachers' assurances that they know their students well, their knowledge -- and, by extension the inferences they draw from it--is likely to be colored by the social, emotional, and academic norms of the entire class. Although the importance of teachers' perceptions and observations cannot be denied, they must be used selectively in attempting to identify potentially at-risk students. Results of the present study suggest that one way to accomplish this is to use more objective assessment instruments and to focus on concrete or obvious kinds of behaviors (p. 324).

On the other hand, in a study conducted for a small urban North Carolina district that had received foundation funding for a middle school dropout prevention program, O'Sullivan (1989)

found that a student's age, number of absences and teacher identifications from the previous year were the best predictors of a student's at-risk status the following year. That is, teachers were once again among the best short-term predictors of school failure (cf. Stevens and Pihl, 1982b). O'Sullivan, in contrast with Kagan, concludes that use of teacher identifications could be accurate, efficient and economical.

From interviews with teachers, both for the Richardson et al. (1989) study and my own sociolinguistic study of the term at risk, it appears that in the technical or expert sense of the term, at risk does not reflect teachers' relationships with students, structurally or qualitatively. The following characteristics of teacher identifications of at-risk students emerge:

Immediate. Teachers on any given day can name several students who are not succeeding, either academically or socially or both, in their classrooms. These identifications are not predictive; teachers use the term at risk to mean "in trouble right now." Teachers also want immediate trouble-shooting. In some elementary schools, if a teacher's own efforts with a student fail, the only available advice is from special educator or other specialists. This can lead to what Fuchs (1987) calls "precipitous" and inappropriate referrals to special programs.

Context-dependent. This finding of the Richardson et al. (1989) study was consistent with the findings of Mehan, Hertwick and Meihl (1986). This characteristic makes teacher

identifications unstable across classrooms and over time, whereas what policymakers are seeking is a stable, decontextualized identification system. As an analogy, consider what would happen if the determination of the "poverty level" as a qualification for receiving public assistance were left up to each social service intake worker. This would seem to make program planning and budgeting impossible, because no one at the top of the welfare bureaucracy could possibly predict how many people would qualify.

Individualistic. Teachers talk about cases or stories of individual students, not clusters of variables. What they may not see from this point of view are similarities in their stories, the general social patterns that an epidemiological approach picks up. For example, after listening to forty-three teachers talk about their at-risk students, I could identify clusters of characteristics and stories that were likely to recur. Among female elementary teachers, at-risk students were more likely to be male students with behavior problems, high ability but low academic achievement, and what the teachers considered to be negative home lives.

Attribution of at-risk status to the student or the student's parents, not the teacher or school. In their stories of at-risk students, teachers made heroic efforts to overcome a student's problems but were blocked by their inability to unlock what they saw as the inner psychological causes of the problems or by the noncooperation of parents, their competitors for

control over the child. Ultimately, they attributed students' psychological problems to the home as well, making the family the seat of literally all of the student's school difficulties. They were especially critical of mothers whom they viewed as not taking good care of their children. As a result, teachers said that they wanted two things: more psychological advice about and counseling for students and more intervention in the home. They very rarely mentioned aspects of schools or of their own teaching that might be contributing to a student's problems. These again are patterns that may be invisible to them, because they are taken for granted.

Overlap with special education categories. In most of the cases in the Richardson et al. (1989) study, in many of the stories told by elementary teachers in my own study, and in a further analysis of the Phi Delta Kappa data by Lombardi et al. (1990), many at-risk students were already labelled and participating in special education. This reflects the fact that classroom teachers do not perceive that participation in special education programs solves the student's problems in the regular classroom If they believe that a student was inappropriately referred and labelled in a previous year, they also feel that they have little power to change this situation (Richardson et al, 1989).

These characteristics of teacher identifications can be presented as weaknesses, in comparison with the Epidemiological Model. What are the advantages of teacher identification?

A very obvious advantage of the immediacy of teacher identifications, also pointed out by the early at-risk experts, is that they require no expensive instruments and no waiting for the processing of scores. Teacher identifications also suggest immediate interventions that could make immediate differences, if the resources were available for assisting students, communicating with parents, or changing the teacher's own approach to the child.

Given their context dependency, the validity and reliability of teacher identifications must be interpreted differently, in comparison with predictive instruments. Because teachers do not seem to think of at-riskness as a prediction, judgments about the long-term predictive validity of their identifications may not be appropriate. Since teachers readily recognize that students change over the course of a year, either because of changes in their family lives, the success of teacher interventions, or simple maturation, stability of teacher identifications is also an unrealistic expectation. Of course, for the same reasons the stability of identifications based on "risk factors" may be questionable.

As for the individualistic nature of teachers' at-risk identifications, they reflect the reality that at the face-to-face level, people cannot be picked apart into variables. Rather, at-riskness may be best represented in case study or story form. In stories, variables do not interact; people do. In all of the teacher stories of at-risk students related for the

Richardson et al. (1989) study and this study, teachers themselves had roles. The stories ended in despair only when teachers had given up on the possibility of classroom strategies or school interventions making a difference. Yet every educator can tell stories of students who exhibited all of the "risk factors" but succeeded. It may be that the seeds of solutions for failure and dropping out are in these other stories, in the unknown cases which are considered "error variance" in statistical prediction models.

Attribution of student problems to the problem family and overlap of at-risk with special education categories both illustrate the absence of contact between significant adults in some children's lives. There is little time in the classroom teacher's day to communicate either with parents or with special education teachers. In the Richardson et al. (1989) study, the researchers found that teachers sometimes made inaccurate assumptions about families and special education programs, because of this lack of communication.

Teacher identifications, therefore, provide an entirely different kind of information about students than at-risk profiles, information that may be more suggestive of effective interventions -- especially if one's concept of intervention includes interventions with teachers and interventions to change the structure and culture of schools. Ideally, teacher identifications of at-risk students could open up critical dialogues about the practice of teaching, the organization of

schools, and the characteristics of society that impede student success. In working with teachers directly to generate explanations for student failure, one might introduce the possibility that teacher beliefs (Winfield, 1986), classroom and school organization (Cuban, 1989), lack of community and government responsiveness to racism and poverty (Fine, 1988) may be responsible. The teachers in my interviews unanimously complained about the limited time available to work with at-risk students and their parents. By focusing our attention on students, the at-risk movement distracts us from the perennial dilemmas of teaching -- too little time, too many children, and too little understanding of their differences in an environment that values cultural and academic conformity.

V. CONCLUSIONS

In a recent review of the Richardson et al. (1989) study, Finn (1991) contends that neither teachers nor the epidemiological number-crunchers are sophisticated enough in their thinking to understand and guide policies for at-risk students. Both conceptual models of at-risk students, Finn declares, are inadequate. Despite its inadequacies, the Epidemiological Model has had a predominant influence on at-risk student policies, because of its promise of objectivity, accuracy and efficiency in the use of limited education funds. Research and researchers have profited from a rise in legitimacy as sources of knowledge for at-risk policy decisions. Policymakers and other sponsors of research have spent millions of dollars to

develop very predictable lists of predictors, without consulting the people who work with at-risk students every day, and who may have the most to do with the social construction of school failure -- the best predictor of further failure and eventual withdrawal from school. They also appear not to have consulted the earlier at-risk literature, which would have warned them of the difficulties of predictive models.

However, my conclusion is not that policymakers should adopt teacher identifications of at-risk students as the basis for targeting at-risk funds and programs. Rather, it is what we learn from teacher identifications, that we do not learn from the Epidemiological Model, that offers a starting place for reform. Teacher stories of at-risk students show us where and how failure happens. According to the Social Constructivist Model, which teachers act upon though they may not articulate, the future is continuously being constructed through social interactions in the present. Student failure or dropping out are not in some fundamental ways analogous to diseases; they are social accomplishments (McDermott, 1987a). They are but the final outcomes of minutes, hours and days in schools in which the possibility of success is gradually eroded rather than sustained. If these outcomes have become predictable for certain groups of students, it is not because they are carriers of social characteristics that, like disease organisms, have infected them from within. It is because in our responses to them as educators, policymakers and citizens of this society, we have

failed to value them enough to make their failure an impetus to deeper changes in our values and practices (Cuban, 1989). We would prefer, once again, to label students as deviants, as outcasts, and subject them to still another "cure," than to work from the classroom up on a serious reconstruction of schooling.

At risk as an educational buzzword may have a shorter lifespan than culturally disadvantaged. Fine (1988) has remarked that from the beginning the label at risk smacked of "kitsch." It seems all too familiar. Criticism of yet another explanation of student failure that focuses on the characteristics of students and their families now is quick to assert itself (McDermott, 1987b). As Tillman (1991) has argued, it may already be time to abandon the label at risk and get on with it:

> The landscape at all levels of the educational system is inundated with characterizations and/or definitions of "at-risk students" which serve as euphemistic caricatures [of] students who attend our institutions of learning and who may be different and who may have varying backgrounds vis a vis the expected norm...If you honestly believe that virtually every student can achieve expected and/or prescribed levels of learning in our schools under the right circumstances, then it is (I think) utterly insane to use the nomenclature "at risk students" which in fact predetermines, predisposes, predicts and promotes failure in schools for such students (1991, p. 80).

Perhaps at risk will mark the end of the cycle of replacement of labels for students whom our society has failed, and the beginning of wisdom.

NOTES

1. Note that "at risk" will appear in three different forms in this report. I will use the linguistic convention of underlining when referring to at risk as a term; the hyphenated form, at-risk, when using it as a one-word adjective, as in at-risk students; and without the hyphen when used as a prepositional phrase, as in "children at risk for learning disabilities."

2. A linguistic marker of the familiarity of these writers with the epidemiological uses of the term at risk is that many of them used the term in a specialized way. The rule in epidemiology is to specify the population at risk and the condition for which they are at risk, e.g. preschool children (population) at risk for schizophrenia (condition) (Lilienfeld & Lilienfeld, 1980). These authors do not label a group simply "at risk," except as shorthand for this longer, more technically correct, form.

3. Four of the articles were not research-based. These were Beach & Halverson (1981), which evaluated programs for already-identified at-risk youth; Lindsay & Wedell (1982) and Abramson (1983), which critically analyzed early identification processes and found them wanting; and New York State Board of Education (1984), a needs assessment for special services for pupils at risk in New York, based on census and social services data on the numbers of children in each of a long list of risk categories.

4. Edelman (1984), a critic of prevention practices, has held that helping professionals use prediction and predictive terms such as "high risk" to assert their authority over persons who are currently normal, on the basis that they might become deviant. This then justifies controlling the behavior of the "high risk" by pulling them into prevention programs.

5. In one case this was ironic, since the researchers had criticized teacher identifications at length. However, their conclusion was that since their instrument identified fewer children than teachers, it was less "discriminatory" (Magliocca, Rinaldi & Stephens, 1979).

6. This would help to account for the instability in teacher identifications of at-risk students over the length of the school year observed by Magliocca, Rinaldi & Stephens (1979), and later by Richardson et al. (1989).

7. A Nation at Risk did not originate the idea of referring to "disadvantaged" groups as at-risk. Before A Nation at Risk, three ERIC reports had used at risk in this way. However, these cases could be accounted for by the overlap between low socioeconomic and minority status and contact with social agencies in the welfare and criminal justice systems, which operate within the mental health or public health models, the realms of the early at-risk experts.

8. Another impetus for the adoption of at risk as a new buzzword was the sheer popularity of A Nation at Risk. One indicator is that titles with the term at risk in CIJE and RIE went from 10 in 1982 (all accounted for by the medical/psychological/special education experts) to 15 in 1983, to 39 in 1984. At risk has also come into more widespread use as public discussion and knowledge of the epidemiological model has increased in recent years due to public health crises, e.g. the risk of AIDS for certain populations.

9. This section concentrates on research on identification of at-risk students. A great deal of the new research has focused on program development and evaluation, to provide "how to" advice to policy makers and practitioners. Some researchers appear to have relabelled their work from "disadvantaged" students (e.g., Chapter I) to "at risk" students (e.g., Slavin, Karweit and Madden, 1989; Pogrow, 1988; Pallas, Natriello and McDill, 1988), reflecting the use of at risk as a replacement for the older descriptor. Other work is critical of the at-risk student movement for exactly this reason -- that it presents old ideas under a new guise (e.g., Cuban, 1989; Fine, 1988; Tillman, 1991).

10. The one exception to this pattern reported by ERIC occurred in Springfield, Oregon, where district decision makers consulted the research on at-risk identification and held a meeting with free-lance at-risk expert Jerry Conrath. District leaders then asked people in each school to define at risk according to the norms of their school, and these definitions contributed to a district definition. Doubtless the definitions were influenced by what the participants had heard in their meetings, but this was still the only example of a bottom-up process (De Pauw, 1987).

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